GUIDES

The lore of Mass Effect: A complete guide

Everything you need to know for Andromeda, with minimal spoilers for the original trilogy

By Susana Polo @NerdGerhl Mar 21, 2017, 4:00pm EDT

When *Mass Effect 3* came to a close, its ending was so final and wide-reaching that fans were uncertain where BioWare could even begin to create a followup story in the same setting.

The answer turned out to be: an entirely different galaxy.

Mass Effect: Andromeda is here, and it's been a long time since we've had a new installment of the Mass Effect series — even longer since it began in the first place. But fortunately, because of a particular trick of Andromeda's setting, it's possible to recap most of the relevant lore without spoiling the plot of the original games — just the broad strokes of the story of *Mass Effect* and the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*.

So whether you're an old fan looking to refresh your memory, or a new one who might want to go back to the old trilogy eventually, this guide will get you up to speed. Beginning with ...

BASIC CONCEPTS

MASS EFFECT FIELDS

And you thought this franchise's name was just two cool-sounding words put together.

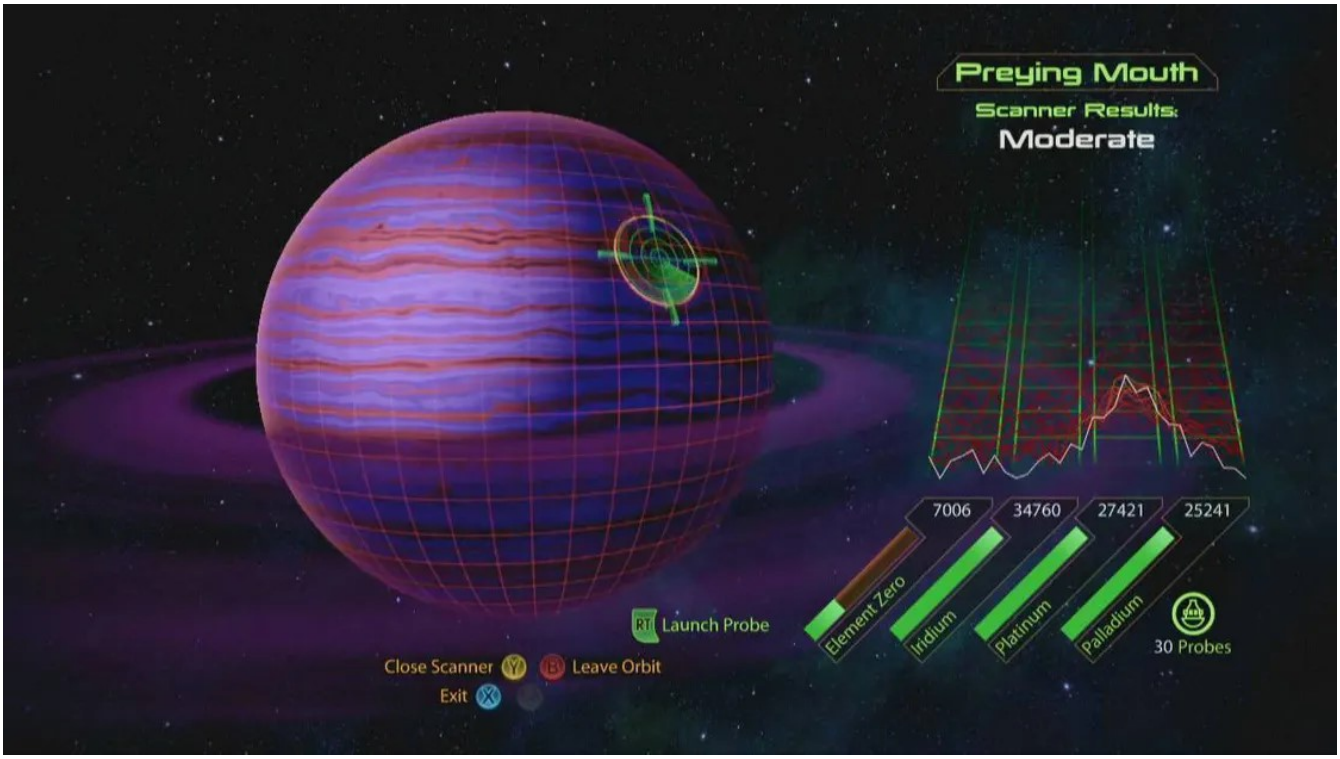
The Mass Effect is the key technological underpinning of Mass Effect's science fiction setting. Scientists and engineers in the Milky Way galaxy have discovered One Neat Trick to change the mass of an object in space-time without otherwise altering its physical composition. The Higgs boson hates them!

Increasing an object's mass provides artificial gravity in spacefaring ships and installations. Reducing an object's mass has given the galaxy faster-than-light travel without messing about with relativistic time differences — and it's trivialized a process vital to intergalactic trade and culture that used to be hugely resource intensive: traveling from a planet's surface to open space.

Inexpensive, sturdy, space-ready construction materials? Manufactured with mass effect fields. Functionally infinite ammunition? Mass effect field. Flying cars? Ship shields? *Jetpacks*?

Mass effect.

ELEMENT ZERO



Any sci-fi science advancement worth its salt needs to depend on a rare element, and in Mass Effect, that is a substance known as Element Zero. Eezo, as it is informally known, is created when solid matter interacts with the energy of a supernova. It is only found in large quantities in the asteroid debris surrounding pulsars and neutron stars, and typically only mined there by the small number of outfits that can afford to navigate such dangerous stellar terrain.

When subjected to an electrical current, eezo produces dark energy, which can be manipulated into creating a mass effect field. This makes it the basic material for every FTL starship engine in the galaxy and every other use of a mass effect field, big or small.

But eezo is also infamous for the way it interacts with biological organisms.

BIOTICS

HUMAN ANTI-BIOTIC PREJUDICE

A few decades before humans made first contact, a series of ship accidents contaminated wide swaths of populated areas with Element Zero. From these accidents, and others, the first human biotics were born.

Human biotics are the subject of significant prejudice — even the subject of superstition, from the erroneous belief that they have telepathy in addition to telekinesis, and can read the thoughts or control the actions of other people.

Their history has been marred with deadly accidents at schools for biotic teens and manipulative recruitment into human militaries. Biotic implants for humans are an untested medical technology and many older human biotics live with permanent implants known to cause cause chronic headaches, insanity, mental disability and severe pain. Moreover, rumors persist that biotic tech manufacturers and private biotic schools have secretly exposed human colonies to eezo in seeming accidents — in order to ensure the that they'll always have customers.

In most cases, if an unborn child is exposed to Element Zero, it will be born healthy and unremarkable. In a smaller number of cases, fetuses develop severe physical deformities or terminal cancers. However, in an even *smaller* number of cases (in humans, the ratio is one in 10) the fetus will develop harmless eezo nodules along its entire nervous system — eventually giving it the innate ability to create and manipulate mass effect fields.

And you thought you'd left the mages behind in Dragon Age.

Sentient beings with the ability to manipulate mass effect fields are known as biotics, and with years of training, they can develop a sort of variable telekinesis. In order to amplify their biotic abilities to the point of military usefulness — or to even properly harness them at all — most biotics have cranial amplifiers surgically implanted in their bodies at puberty.

In addition to moving things with their minds, biotics can temporarily increase the mass of matter in an area until movement through or inside it becomes impossible, and even create multiple conflicting mass effect fields to tear objects — and people — apart.

Biotics occur in all the dominant races that appear in the Mass Effect games, but different races consider them to have different places in society. Among humans, biotics are a phenomenon both rare and new.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In Mass Effect, the Milky Way galaxy has a particular history with artificial intelligence. In a nutshell: Creating, using, and researching artificial

intelligence is heavily restricted within Citadel Space, and primarily illegal. The advanced, voiced-recognizing computing solutions in wide use are “virtual intelligence,” essentially an advanced version of Siri — very cleverly programmed, but not self-aware. VIs are considered less than human, and AIs are widely feared. True artificial intelligence is considered too great a threat to biological life to tinker with, and the galaxy has its own perfect cautionary tale in the quarians.

The quarians were not always interstellar nomads, looked down upon as beggars and thieves, blamed for unleashing a scourge upon the galaxy. Once, they were a planet-living society, just beginning to enjoy the wide use of robotic helpers called geth, meaning “servant of the people.” A single geth has enough processing power for its motor functions and sensory input and little else. When more than one geth are brought together, they are capable of networking their processing power, freeing up cycles for more advanced forms of reasoning, making them capable of more complicated or nuanced tasks.

Slowly, through their ubiquitousness to quarian society, the geth network grew to the point where it formed an emergent artificial intelligence — the geth achieved sentience and consciousness. A protracted war began between the two biological and technological races, that ultimately ended with the surviving quarians fleeing their homeworld in what is now known as the Migrant Fleet.

The Migrant Fleet roams the galaxy still — quarians live under strict population controls in cramped quarters of salvaged, refurbished and repurposed ships and face widespread discrimination among other species. Meanwhile, the area of the quarian homeworlds is now geth space — any ship that enters it is immediately destroyed.

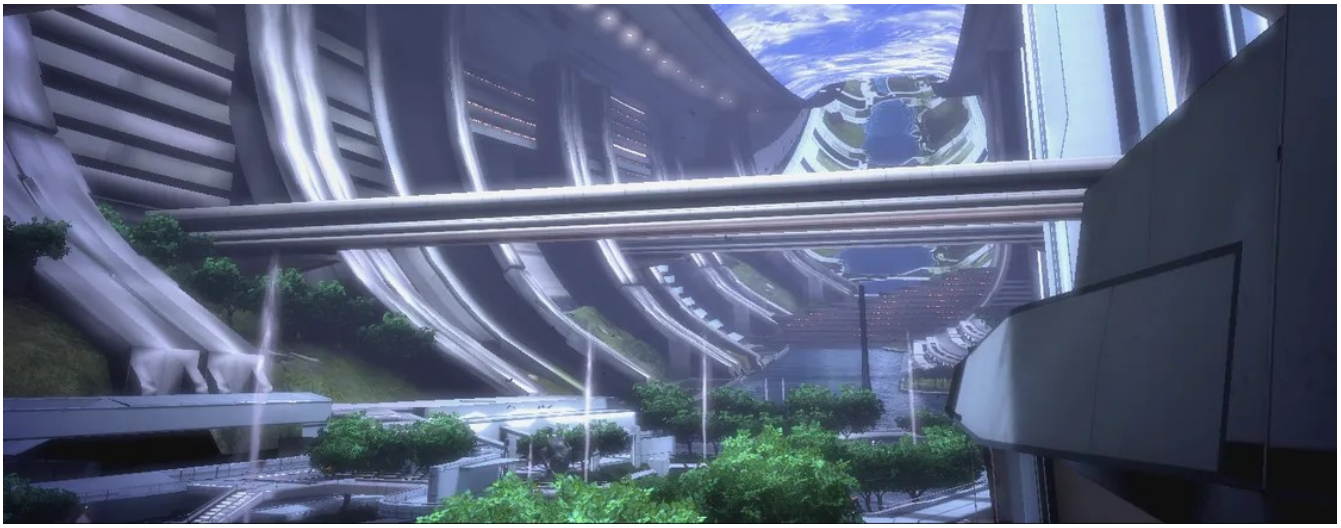
A GALACTIC UNDERBELLY

While Mass Effect has its peaceful, multi-species pan-galactic government, there's still plenty of room in the setting for crime, corruption and organized malice. From roving, disorganized batarian pirates and slaving gangs, to the Omega space station — really an ancient, repurposed Element Zero mine referred to by some as the criminal counterpart to the Citadel — the Milky Way has its fair share of illicit activities, illegal drugs and malevolent movers and shakers.

The most infamous of the last might be the Shadow Broker, the galaxy's most powerful trader of secrets, whose true identity is entirely unknown. Even seasoned criminals and law enforcement officers have no real evidence of whether the Shadow Broker is a single individual or a coalition.

Corporate power also holds considerable sway in the Milk Way, for good and for ill. The human-supremacist paramilitary group known as Cerberus — founded in the wake of what humans refer to as the First Contact War by a figure known only as the Illusive Man — uses several front corporations in order to further its cause without attracting more attention than it can handle.

THE CITADEL AND MASS RELAYS



THE CITADEL COUNCIL

Dozens of races make up the population of the galaxy, but only three have a single seat on the Council: the asari, the salarians, and the turians (although membership is expanded to include a human representative over the course of the Mass Effect trilogy). The Council gives judgement on the laws governing Citadel space — particularly the relations between species — and maintains law and order through its diplomatic, intelligence gathering and military arms, but does not govern directly.

Races that are granted embassies on the Citadel are considered “associate members,” which entitles them to bring issues, such as disputes between two governments, to the council for resolution.

In Mass Effect, even a faster-than-light drive and a ship full of eezo isn’t enough to cross the huge distances between star systems in a reasonable timeframe. For that, the galaxy uses a network of ancient, massive space installations known as Mass Relays to slingshot ships across the vast expanses of space. Each relay is nine miles long, made of an indestructible material that is still unknown to science and contains a massive Element Zero core. Two linked relays can create a corridor of nearly massless space between them, propelling starships distances that would take centuries to cross with an FTL drive.

The only other thing in the galaxy that’s made from the same resilient-but-unknown material is the Citadel, a vast deep-space station, maintained for millennia by a strange, silent race of small, drone-like techno-organic hybrids

that have come to be called the Keepers. The Citadel's place at the nexus of several critical mass relays has led to its use as the capital city of the galaxy's governing body: the Citadel Council.

But who created the Citadel, the Keepers and the Mass Relays? For millennia, historians in Citadel space believed that they were the surviving ruins of an extinct progenitor race known as the Protheans.

The original Mass Effect trilogy told the story of how that assumption turned out to be terribly, terribly wrong.

THE REAPERS/THE REAPER CYCLE

The Reapers are race of massive, immensely powerful, sentient starships whose only goal is to maintain a cycle of purging all faster-than-light-capable civilizations from the galaxy whenever one arises to galactic dominance. Their last purge occurred 50,000 years ago: While humanity was just beginning to make art and tools, the Reapers were wiping the Protheans from existence.

Exactly why the Reapers do this and how they came to exist is a matter of deep Mass Effect spoilers, but we can tell you this: The Reapers built the mass relays

and the Citadel in order to expedite the rise of pan-galactic civilizations — a sort of stellar trellis to guide sentient ~~beans~~ beings towards faster-than-light travel — and ensure that their technology and government would be dependent on Reaper-controlled systems. A farm and slaughterhouse in one.

After harvesting the Protheans, the Reapers hibernated in the dark space between the Milky Way and its neighboring galaxies for 50,000 years, before the vanguard of their invasion force made itself known during the events of *Mass Effect*. *Mass Effect 3* was primarily concerned with the united efforts of the entire space-faring galaxy to enact a desperate plan to save some remnant of civilization, as the Reapers razed home world after home world.

THIS IS WHY *MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA* TAKES PLACE IN A DIFFERENT GALAXY ENTIRELY

Aside from being famously controversial, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* (again, no spoilers) presents the player with a choice that leads to three immensely different outcomes for the galaxy as a whole. It would be prohibitively difficult for a game set after the events of *Mass Effect 3* to account for all three of those endings, but without the galactic setting of the previous games — the races, the politics, the history — well, it wouldn't be Mass Effect.

Mass Effect: Andromeda solves this problem by leaving the Milky Way entirely, and doing so before the Reaper invasion begins in earnest. *Andromeda* will focus on the exploits of the men, women and sentients of the Andromeda Initiative, a collaborative multi-species expedition from the Milky Way to the Andromeda galaxy. Because there are no relays to slingshot us to another galaxy, the journey to Andromeda will take 600 years, even with powerful FTL drives (colonists will spend that time in suspended animation).

And we know exactly which of Mass Effect's expansive cast of alien races are coming along for the ride.

RACES/HISTORY OF THE GALAXY

THE ASARI

The asari have two characteristics that make them practically unique among the galaxy. First, every asari has biotic capabilities, though not all of them choose to develop them with training and implants. Second, the asari have only one biological sex. Instead of trading cellular material directly, asari reproduce by biotically linking their nervous systems with their partner's and using the electrical pattern of the other's nerves to provide a template for half the DNA of their resulting child.

Some asari are born with a genetic defect — upon maturity it will become clear that the individual is incapable of mating safely, uncontrollably overpowering their partner's nervous system and causing a potentially fatal brain hemorrhage. But this condition, known as Ardat-Yakshi, is very rare, and its existence is a secret that the asari closely guard from non-asari out of shame.

ASARI SENSUALITY

Though they have only one sex, many asari identify as women and use female pronouns. And any human who looks at them will agree: They bear a striking resemblance to human women. Ask a turian, and they will point to the shapely cranial crests of asari as a familiar physical feature. A salarian would draw a connection between the vibrant blue to violet skin tones of asari and some salarians.

Regardless, there is a consensus: A large number of races in the galaxy agree that asari are conventionally attractive. Oddly so.

Asari are well aware of this and perfectly comfortable with it: Young asari in the early stages of adulthood often take jobs that take advantage of this fixation. But just because they are xenophilic does not make asari more promiscuous than other species — that's just a galaxy's worth of wishful thinking.

Their unique biology allows asari to mate with any member of a sentient species, with the child always remaining asari. The asari only discovered other sentient species around 1,500 years ago — and when individual asari can live to be more than 1,000, that's not a very long time at all. Yet, they have embraced the influx of new genetic templates and cultural diversity so readily that it is already considered somewhat disgraceful for an asari to reproduce with another asari — even though mating with a member of another species usually means that they will long outlive their partner, and likely raise their daughter predominantly alone. The asari see inter-species mating as a way to add diversity, and therefore adaptability and strength, to the asari race.

Understanding the cultural effect of asari reproduction and lifespan is vitally important to understanding their place in galactic history. As a civilization, asari are predisposed to seek compromise, diplomacy and pacifism with the mostly shorter-lived races of the galaxy — to seeing the big picture and taking the long view.

This is not to say that asari do not have a formidable military, or that they have never waged war. Neither their fleet nor their infantry is what you might imagine of supreme galactic power: The asari army is composed of thousands of local militias led by elected leaders. But their lack of hierarchy and numbers belies their martial prowess.

Given her lifespan, an asari Huntress might already have two or three decades of training in the martial arts under her belt on her first day. By the time she retires after a routine career, there may not be a non-asari marine in the galaxy who could take her in a one-on-one fight. A suite of well-honed biotic abilities — rare in every other galactic military — is considered a prerequisite for asari

soldiers.

As the turians say: “The asari are the finest warriors in the galaxy. Fortunately, there are not many of them.” Another ending of the phrase might be: Fortunately, they do not anger easily.

So it’s a very good thing they were the first faster-than-light-capable species to discover the Mass Relays and the Citadel in the current Reaper cycle. The history of Citadel space is rife with violent or otherwise disruptive first contact events, even with the eventual calm interference of the Citadel government. The asari favor big picture solutions and compromise, and they value diversity and inclusion. The technological, economic and cultural dominance of being the first to the Citadel allowed them to set the tone for the galaxy’s government.

THE SALARIANS

Salarians are the second species of this cycle to have found the mass effect relays and made first contact with the asari, forming the Citadel Council to govern the alliance between, and shared interests of, the two races. In many ways, the salarians are something of an asari opposite.

The warmblooded but amphibious species lives only about 30-40 years due to their relatively fast metabolism. Salarians sleep one hour in each day, think fast, speak fast and decide fast. Their population — due in equal parts to the biology of their egg-laying reproductive cycle and the cultural rules that have evolved around it — is 90 percent male. The Salarian Union is ruled by that 10 percent female population of Dalatrasses — matriarchs, essentially. Male salarians can, and routinely do, rise to positions of power in other professional fields, but only rarely in politics.

Salarians are the galaxy's foremost inventors and technological first adopters, sometimes more interested in improving on an effective but blunt solution for a problem than actually implementing it. Relatedly, though it is equipped with the latest weapons, sensors and cloaking devices, the salarian navy is relatively small. To make up for this, the Salarian Union relies on another thing that comes more naturally to salarians than some other species: espionage and alliance.

The naturally photographic salarian memory is integral to the race's infamous predilection toward intelligence gathering and spycraft — though some might call it manipulation or deceit. In battle, salarians strike preemptively, believing that a war is best ended before it is begun. To declare war *before* attacking the enemy would be seen as tantamount to insanity. Their intelligence service, spearheaded by the so-called Special Tasks Group, is unparalleled, except, perhaps, for the Citadel Council's intelligence gathering arm — which is also run by salarians.

THE KROGAN

The reptilian krogan are the third species to be included in the Andromeda Initiative — and they are the only one to have not had a seat on the Citadel Council at some point during the Mass Effect trilogy. The fact that they were included at all is the matter of some controversy. The history of krogans and the wider galaxy is a complicated one, beginning with the fact that the krogan were given faster-than-light technology by salarians, rather than discovering or developing it on their own.

Without intervention (more on that in a bit) krogan reproduce at an astonishing rate, with a krogan woman capable of laying clutches of 1,000 fertilized eggs in a single year. Krogan are usually more than 7 feet tall and are biologically equipped with nearly impervious hides, as well as secondary and tertiary organs for all of their major bodily systems and a characteristic hump that can store fluids and nutrients against surviving extended periods without food or water. They will live for centuries before dying a natural death, are virtually impossible to paralyze and can enter a “blood rage” in which they become impervious to pain. There is some confusion as to whether they can even bleed.

They have evolved all of these abilities in the crucible of the intensely hostile environment of their homeworld, Tuchanka, which, until krogan culture reached its industrial age, kept their population at an equilibrium. But krogan society remained fundamentally oriented around perseverance over deadly adversity — after taming their environment, they turned on each other.

Global thermonuclear war irradiated Tuchanka into a wasteland and sent krogan society back to a tribal stone age for 2,000 years — until they were

discovered by the salarians.

THE RACHNI WAR

Salarians offered the krogan advanced technology — including the means to stabilize Tuchanka's ruined atmosphere — and helped them relocate to a more hospitable planet. This was not a predominantly altruistic act. At the time of the krogan first contact, Citadel races had been engaged in a losing war against an existential threat for nearly a century. In discovering and uplifting the krogan, the salarians hoped that they could be convinced to join Citadel forces to push back and eradicate the rachni, a highly aggressive, intelligent, hive-minded insect race with which it was virtually impossible to negotiate.

The krogan did, pursuing the rachni even to their homeworlds, executing their queens and driving the species to extinction. They were hailed as saviors, given multiple planets to colonize in gratitude, and their fallen were honored with a monument in the Citadel itself. But again, without Tuchanka or the rachni, the krogan population exploded, with krogan settlers expanding to more and more planets — often worlds already settled by other Citadel races.

THE GENOPHAGE

When the Krogan Rebellions broke out, the Citadel found themselves fighting another losing war — against the very people who'd helped them win the last one. Salarian scientists developed another solution — a weapon so terrible that the very threat of it would ensure it would never have to be used. But instead, new, more militaristic allies who had suffered severe losses in the Rebellions — the turians (more on them in a bit) — implemented it immediately.

The salarians had created a biological weapon that would permanently alter the DNA of all krogan. Functionally, it severely increased the incidence of stillbirth in krogan reproduction — now, only one birth in a 1,000 produces live offspring. It was not intended to be a death sentence, but the salarians had underestimated the krogan cultural drive to prove oneself in life by facing deadly challenges. The instincts that helped the krogan to conquer Tuchanka are just as strong — but no longer supported by their prodigious rate of reproduction. Effectively, the genophage is slowly driving the krogan to extinction, and they know it.

Modern krogan society consists of isolated krogan men, usually employed in mercenary work for and with other species — male krogan are so territorial that they cannot share living space, even in the necessarily cramped confines of a starship. Krogan women are rarely seen outside of krogan homeworlds, where they primarily live in powerful, fiercely defended all-female clans that focus on the breeding of each meager new generation.

There is no cure for the genophage, and the Citadel Council considers it better that the krogan slowly die off than rise to threaten galactic stability again. The krogan attitude on this is one of general resentment, impotence and existential fatalism.

Without giving anything away, the morality of the genophage and the future of the krogan race was a major plot line of the Mass Effect trilogy, one that eventually reached a conclusion in *Mass Effect 3*. But, since the Andromeda Initiative will be leaving the Milky Way galaxy well before the events of that game, the future of the krogan in the Andromeda galaxy remains unclear.

THE TURIANS

TURIAN APPEARANCE AND BIOLOGY

Given their clawed digits and tough, metallic carapace, one might easily assume that, like krogan, turians are reptilian, when in fact they are actually descended from an avian species. Most life forms on the turian homeworld of Palaven have evolved some form of metal-laced carapace or exoskeleton, in a defense against its greater-than-usual levels of solar radiation. A turian's carapace does not notably protect them against impacts, however, just some forms of radiation.

All turians have mandible-like facial features flanking their mouths — but turian women lack the sweptback cranial crests of their male counterparts. Nearly all members of the race wear distinctive facial markings unique to their home colony — a cultural remnant from an era in which they were embroiled in civil war and such tattoos were a badge of honor.

Turian biochemistry is also based on dextro-amino acids rather than amino acids. At best, the food (or, otherwise, the cells) of amino-acid based life forms will pass through a turian's digestive system without providing any nutrition. At worst, it will cause a severe allergic reaction that may become fatal without treatment, and the same is true for amino-acid based life forms that ingest turian food or cellular matter. This can be a concern for turians and their partners, when the former are engaged in interspecies sexual relationships.

Turians already had a history of spacefaring and mass relay use before coming

to the attention of the Citadel Council. It's just that they were embroiled in an interstellar civil war when the Council was formed, and wouldn't discover the Citadel until 700 years later. For their hand in putting down the Krogan Rebellions and taking up their vacated role as a galactic peacekeeping force, the turians were given a seat on the Citadel Council — the first time it had been expanded since it was founded.

The turian government is essentially a military meritocracy, where corruption and abuse is held at bay by the turian cultural devotion to personal responsibility, honesty, honor and self-sacrifice. Case in point: If a turian performs so poorly in their job that it is necessary to demote them, shame is laid not on the poorly performing individual, but on the person who promoted them beyond their capacity in the first place. Turian society is similarly oriented around a devotion to the public good: A young turian's compulsory military service begins at age 15 and will last until age 30.

Though the considerable turian navy and infantry serve as the primary military arm of the Citadel Council, it would be incomplete to refer to it as merely a war machine. The umbrella of the turian military covers the police force, fire fighters, engineers and architects of any public building or utility on their homeworlds and colonies — even turian merchant marines are engaged in the distribution of turian resources throughout the galaxy to turian communities.

Despite their militaristic society and reputation for attending to rules, turians are considered relatively progressive as a race, when it comes to new ideas and personal behavior. It all comes back to the turian value of personal accountability. As long as you do your job and don't prevent others from doing theirs, turians consider it immaterial what you do in your downtime.

Still, it was turian rules-keeping that brought them into explosive conflict with humanity in the Relay 314 Incident, or, as humans refer to it, the First Contact War.

THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY IN

THE GALAXY

Characterized by their adaptability and capacity for rapid development and advancement, humans are the newest racial addition of considerable size or significance to the society of Citadel space. Compared to the other races of the Citadel Council, they are equally advanced, but young and untested. While humanity was just forming its long-dominant form of religious belief, Christianity, the rachni were overwhelming Citadel space. Little more than 200 years have elapsed between the first human steps into space and the launch of the Andromeda Initiative.

The modern era of human spaceflight began in 2148, when human settlers discovered the ruins of a Prothean research site on the south pole of Mars. They uncovered irrefutable evidence not merely of the existence of alien life, but of intelligent alien life from beyond their galaxy, that appeared to have been studying ancient Cro-Magnon humans. Information deciphered from the Mars site led to the discovery that beneath the ice of Pluto's largest moon, Charon, was not a rocky core — but a mass relay.

Within a year, human governments had allied together to form the Systems

Alliance, an international political body in charge of expanding and defending human territory in space. And within that same year, a team of human explorers — one of which was Alec Ryder (more on him in a bit) — used the Charon mass relay to travel beyond the Sol system for the first time.

The mass effect was reverse engineered from technology at the Prothean site and Charon, and humans literally took to the stars, expanding to a host of colonies and activating every mass relay they could find — all without encountering a single intelligent alien life form — until 2157.

THE FIRST CONTACT WAR

Opening a mass effect relay without knowing where it links to was outlawed after the Rachni War, when that very act brought salarian explorers into first contact with the rachni and gave the insectoid race a path to Citadel space — nearly destroying Citadel civilization. So, when turian soldiers encountered a small scouting group of human ships attempting to open a dormant mass relay in 2157, they attacked.

Only one of those ships managed to make it back to the human colony of

Shanxi, which was quickly discovered and invaded. Assuming that they had disabled the bulk of the alien military, the turians settled in to occupy the colony — only for the arrival of the Systems Alliance navy to take them by surprise, and roust the turian presence from Shanxi.

Before the situation could escalate into all-out war, the Citadel Council stepped in, brokering peace, introducing humans to the wider galaxy and ordering the turians to pay heavy reparations for instigating the conflict. In all, the First Contact War lasted just a few months and took only 623 human lives (and roughly the same number, though slightly higher, of turian ones) — and it's the reason you may still find friction between humans and turians today.

In addition to incorporating humans into Citadel society, the First Contact War caused a huge surge in public approval for the Systems Alliance as a political body — giving it the power to form a parliamentary structure. Functionally, the Systems Alliance now speaks for and governs humanity. It was awarded with an embassy on the Citadel in 2165, less than a decade after making first contact, much to the chagrin of other species who had been jockeying for recognition for more than twice as long.

And though player's choices fundamentally affect the makeup of the Citadel Council in *Mass Effect*, by the end of the game, the Systems Alliance has a seat on the galaxy's highest governing body.

COMMANDER SHEPARD

Reader, we have talked enough about galactic history, and the machinations of governments and wars across the vast distances between stars. It's time to talk about the face of the original Mass Effect trilogy: Commander Shepard. In this section, we will discuss some spoilers for *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*.

A player may choose a combination of several backgrounds for Shepard, but this much remains the same: Born on April 11, 2154, Shepard holds the highest rank of the Systems Alliance's special forces program, is a veteran of human conflict with batarian pirate forces and the first human to be appointed a Spectre.

The Spectres are a group of elite enforcers, the ultimate culmination of the Citadel Council's military and espionage arms, whose work — and even a clear number of how many Spectres exist — is kept classified. They are personally authorized by the Council to act completely independently and to use whatever means necessary to preserve galactic stability, including deadly force.

Shepard was given Spectre status in 2183, after the Commander discovered that the turian Spectre Saren Arterius was somehow using geth forces to search for a way to bring about the return of the Reapers, a mysterious force that lead to the Prothean extinction. Along with the crew of the SSV Normandy — including decorated Systems Alliance officers Kaiden Alenko and Ashley Williams — and several recruited specialists and operatives — including Prothean expert Liara T'Soni and Citadel Security officer Garrus Vakarian — Shepard pursued Saren's trail. The Commander eventually discovered that Saren's massive warship, Sovereign, was, in fact, a Reaper itself. With the help of the Systems Alliance navy, the Normandy thwarted an attack by Sovereign, Saren and a swarm of geth ships on the Citadel — putting a stop to Sovereign's attempt to call the Reapers from deep space to begin a new galactic purge.

A month later, while putting down the last remnants of geth forces, the Normandy was attacked by an unknown ship. Commander Shepard was last seen while rescuing the Normandy's pilot, even as the ship broke apart in orbit above an uninhabited planet. Shepard was officially declared "killed in action" by the Systems Alliance shortly afterward. Without the significant voice of the

first human Spectre to speak on it, galactic apprehension about the potential return of an entire race of entities like the Reaper Sovereign has since faded.

A year later, the Andromeda Initiative issued its first orientation briefing to its recruits. A year after that, the Andromeda Initiative launched.

As you may have guessed, Shepard does not stay dead or lost for the second and third games in the Mass Effect trilogy. But the Andromeda Initiative's recruitment and launch coinciding with the two-year period in which the Commander was dead answers an important continuity question: How could a massive undertaking like the Initiative have gone off without the player hearing of it during the games?

THE ANDROMEDA INITIATIVE AND THE PATHFINDER

THE N7 RANKING

You probably recognize the white N7 logo with its red — let's call it a chevron, that sounds cool — as one of the foundational motifs of Mass Effect, so we may as well explain what it represents.

N7 is a vocational code used by the Systems Alliance, designating that the bearer is a graduate of the galaxy-renowned Interplanetary Combatives Training (ICT) program, and that they have reached the highest possible designation of the program that is possible. The ICT recruits soldiers from all arms of Earth's militaries for a course of training that includes 20-hour days of leading small combat teams through simulated hostile territory under grueling conditions — not unlike the U.S. Army's Ranger School.

If an applicant completes the course, they are designated N1, and the course's reputation is such that even an N1 rank immediately confers respect upon the officer. To advance to N2, an officer must complete the course a second time, for N3, a third, and so forth, through N5. The rank of N6 is only conferred on those who complete a stint of actual combat experience around the galaxy. N7 is only given to those who survive their N6 trial in an "admirable and effective fashion."

Commander Shepard is Mass Effect's most famous holder of the rank of N7. Alec Ryder is another, earning it through his participation in the Charon Relay expedition and the First Contact War, since the rank and its requirements were created and codified sometime after that.

The Andromeda Initiative is a non-military, non-governmental, privately funded enterprise. Its stated goal: to transport members of five core sentient species of Citadel space to the Andromeda galaxy, in order to establish permanent settlements there and eventually create a reliable route between Andromeda and the Milky Way.

In pursuit of this, the Andromeda Initiative has constructed four huge Ark ships as the cornerstones of its intergalactic fleet. Linked by the even larger main hub of the Initiative's operations, a flagship known as the Nexus, each of the four Arks will carry a different species within it, slumbering in thousands of cryostasis chambers. The Nexus will carry a relatively smaller interspecies crew — as well as all of the Initiative's krogan colonists.

Each ark has its own Pathfinder, a single individual charged with spearheading the exploration and colonization of a Golden World — one of several habitable Andromedan planets that the Initiative has detected using data from an enormous, geth-built "faster-than-light" telescope made from three mass effect relays. The Pathfinder of Ark Hyperion is Alec Ryder, an N7-ranked veteran of the First Contact War and, if you play *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, your dad.

One of Ryder's twin children is the lead character of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, depending on whether the player chooses to play as male or female — but either way, your sibling remains a significant part of the game. As for your father ... let's just say the future is unclear. Alec Ryder was introduced in an official Andromeda Initiative briefing as the human Pathfinder — but numerous trailers and other press materials for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* refer to the player character as the Pathfinder instead. And we know that *something* unexpected happens not long after the Initiative arrives in Andromeda.

Basically: We're worried about Alec's long-term survivability. In any case, BioWare has a habit of using any opportunity to give players what we in the industry refer to as "the feels."

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